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A Synthesis of Information from Current Resources on the Educational Needs of New Librarians

Project "O"

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Our aim here is to identify current educational needs of new librarians for the purpose of usable comparison with the continuing educational offerings available nationwide. To this end we have reviewed a variety of available resources with an eye toward key points that might apply specifically to our project. Of course we have not found it possible to be comprehensive. The literature on training and education for new librarians is plentiful, and so we have chosen to sample it carefully rather than trying to read everything. What follows might therefore be described as a selective review of the literature.

While generalizations about training and education are not always very useful, it is worth pointing out by way of introduction that the literature reveals widespread agreement on a couple of points. The most obvious of these is the consensus, sometimes stated but almost always implicit, that training and educational opportunities for new librarians should be abundant. It is also generally held that these opportunities should be both accessible and affordable, and that they should be organized around the introduction and development of particular educational needs (*Medical Library Association New Librarians Issues Survey* 2005; Mossman 2005).

The Transition from Graduate Student to Professional Librarian

Discussion of the transition from graduate school to professional librarianship figures significantly in the literature. For many reasons, beginning librarians tend to find this transition stressful. Perhaps the most frequently cited problems are associated with a lack of professional experience and a limited set of skills. What causes these problems? On the one hand, LIS programs can hardly be expected to provide students comprehensive preparation in the manifold skills of librarianship (Tucker and Torrence 2004). On the other hand, it may be that neither LIS programs nor libraries are doing as much as they can to deal effectively with our current "tremendous educational ferment," which finds the LIS programs lacking a well-defined core curriculum and the libraries lacking equally well-defined core services (Mulaney and O'Connor 2006). Clearly, there is an ongoing debate in the literature regarding the relevance of the MLIS degree.

Perhaps the most frequent complaint voiced by new librarians themselves is that formal education in librarianship emphasizes the theoretical over the practical, including too little "relevant information" (*What Are They Thinking* 2006; Newhouse and Spisak 2004). New public librarians have described the following areas of educational need:

- Performing a reference interview
- Organizing and implementing programs
- Working in collection development

- Working with a mentor or trainer

While the employers of these new public librarians described their young colleagues as enthusiastic, technologically adept, and open to change and new ideas, they also observed the following areas of educational need:

- Lack of people and customer skills
- Lack of professional knowledge
- Lack of practical experience
- Shortage of childrens' librarians
- Shortage of librarians with language skills, especially in Spanish, Russian, and Chinese

Educational programs designed to address these needs might include:

- Techniques for integrating public librarianship into LIS curricula
- Internships for LIS students
- Recruitment programs to attract experienced staff to librarianship

Academic librarians addressed similar issues regarding the lack of practical experience among LIS students (Lillard and Wales 2003). Those not currently working as librarians but preparing to seek their first professional positions would benefit from:

- Intentional cooperation between university libraries and library school educators to provide students hands on training

Entry-level librarians of all kinds must contend with a "disconnect" between projected job openings and actual opportunities for the newly graduated (Holt and Strock; Phelps 2007). This points up a need for more:

- Placement and career training
- Formal mentoring networks
- Training specific to dynamics of entry-level and early career challenges

It is evident that a successful transition from graduate student to practicing librarian requires a complex combination of skills. The literature includes discussion of this subject in terms of "hard" skills, which gather up training topics traditionally associated with librarianship, and "soft" skills, which are grounded in principles communication and apply to areas such as human relations and customer service. Fourie (2004) envisions "new roles" involving soft skills that will enable librarians to remain relevant and "make a difference." This process would involve innovative educational planning and would benefit from coordination with LIS programs grounded in "soft skill" training in such areas as:

- Affective skills
- Constructing personal meaning for events and activities
- Human resources

Further to this point, LIS programs could benefit new librarians by developing:

- A "constructivist-learning environment" with portfolio assessment, affective, and metacognitive skills
- Project management training programs
- Business and financial skills programs
- Political skills training programs

And related professional competencies in which new librarians might be trained (Tucker, Sinha, and Lanham 2006) include:

- Negotiating the transition from graduate school to the profession
- Professional and personal self-assessment
- Organizational politics
- Essentials of career advancement
- Understanding the tenure process (Landry 2005)

Continuing Education: The Varieties of Adaptation

The distinction between hard and soft skills is clearer in some cases than others. Often the two are combined and adapted in service of specific educational needs identified within particular professional contexts. In the area of networking, for example, there may be significant overlap between social and technical skills (Nielsen 2005). For librarians working with websites, new combinations of qualifications might include:

- General, social, and technical communications skills
- Social networking skills
- Technical web application skills
- Writing skills
- Training in different kinds of online communication (hypertext as structure, remediation of content)

There is an obvious level of sophistication involved when multiple skills interpenetrate to form new sets. Not surprisingly, new librarians frequently see themselves as deficient in skill sets of this kind (Millet 2005):

- Project planning
- Fundraising
- Publishing
- Cultivating donations/Development

Broadly speaking, the area of communications demands various combinations of skills, many of which are discussed in the literature:

- Communication with culturally diverse communities (ALA Continuing Education Opportunities)
- Collaboration between faculty and librarians (STS Continuing Education Survey 2005)
- Effective communication among librarians and scholarly community (Stebelman 1996)
- Organizing and implementing programming (Newhouse and Spisak 2004)
- Project management (Fourie 2004)
- Marketing/Outreach (STS Continuing Education Survey 2005)
- Workshop organization and leadership (Chen 2001)
- Packaging, promoting, and presenting services (Chen 2001)

Returning to the concept of networking, various combinations of skills are involved in “developmental networking,” a process that figures centrally in the mentoring programs so important to new librarians (Goodyear 2006; Newhouse and Spisak 2004). By contrast to more traditional “top-down” structures, mentoring programs grounded in developmental networks place responsibility on the mentee to reach out to individuals around them—supervisors, professional seniors, peers, professional juniors, even family members—and develop a network according to the functional areas in which they need help (Goodyear 2006). Here is a good example of the extent to which skills, training topics, and educational needs might overlap in such a developmental network:

Developmental Network Member	Mentoring Function	Potential Activities
Supervisor	Challenging Assumptions	Lead a critical project Chair a campus-wide committee
Professional senior	Sponsorship/visibility coaching	Nomination for jobs Help with conference presentation Coaching through coping with a problem with a supervisor
Professional peer	Acceptance/ confirmation	Conversations that build confidence
Professional junior	Coaching	Help with learning a new software program
Family member or professional acquaintance	Role modeling	Observation in work settings Conversations about career direction

Similar kinds of developmental networking involving various combinations of skills are also relevant in the areas of leadership and management. Regarding leadership, there is abundant evidence that new librarians would benefit from more extensive training opportunities than are currently available to them (Bird 2005). Furthermore, there is a degree of irony apparent in the literature about leadership: on the one hand, employers listed leadership skills among the weaknesses of new librarians (*What Are They Thinking* 2006); on the other, new librarians, particularly of the "NextGen" variety, expressed their desire for programs in which leadership opportunities are available to them (Shonrock 2006). One way of addressing this issue would be to increase training opportunities of the following varieties:

- Leadership opportunities designed specifically for new librarians
- Leadership training that addresses specific weaknesses and identifies requisite strengths of new librarians
- Leadership training that looks beyond the library profession to the private sector (Flatley and Weber 2004)

Training examples drawn from the private sector are also recommended in the areas of:

- Meaningful employee orientation (Mossman 2005)
- Managing change (Flatley and Weber 2004)

Further to the subject of management, there is discussion in the literature of

- Management programs that create training opportunities for new librarians while teaching administrators to take risks by trusting their new employees with projects (Bird 2005; Millet 2005).

There is also a distinction in the literature (Morley 2005) between the two primary aspects of this topic:

- Management of people for new librarians (most difficult)

- Management of assets for new librarians (comparatively easy)

Finally, with regard to management, specific training should be made available for:

- Those new to librarianship *and* new to management (Tucker, Sinha, Lanham 2006).
- Marketing basics (ALA database of continuing education opportunities)
- Managerial skills and ethical values

Before leaving the discussion of soft and hard skills, it is important to note a trend in the literature indicating that certain kinds of training work better for one type of skill or the other (Chesemore et al 2006). For example, online educational opportunities seem best suited for training in particular hard skills:

- Staff reference skills
- Library service
- Information literacy
- Performing a user analysis/community assessment

By contrast, soft skills, despite their great importance, are not seen as being effectively taught in e-sessions (Chesemore et al 2006). Additionally, the design of training methods should consider the people involved as well as the skills being taught. For example, the STS Continuing Education Survey (2005) indicates the following “preferred” methods for receiving continuing education:

- In-person workshops
- Web-based information
- Preconference workshops
- Teleconferences

An important aspect of the new librarian’s education involves coming to terms with the “traditional,” tools of the trade. The literature includes considerable discourse on the established areas of library specialization. For example, recent guidance for new librarians in the area of collection development (Tucker and Torrence 2004) emphasizes mastery of a standard skill set: (1) acclimating to a new library, (2) organizing liaison activities, (3) developing subject expertise, (4) managing budget allocations, (5) identifying user needs, (5) dealing with multiple formats in the selection process, managing time. However, as Tucker and Torrence imply, the apparent familiarity these skills is deceptive, largely because the context in which they are being practiced today is changing rapidly. As with other areas of specialization, the established skills of collection development are undergoing transformation by a variety of forces, computer technology chief among them. In particular, the multiplication of resources and formats complicates the current practice of collection development. This makes apparent an important comprehensive educational need:

- continual training in rapidly evolving traditional skill sets

Other specific skill sets, many of them largely inclusive of “hard” skills, tend toward perpetual change. Several that figure prominently in the literature are:

- Technology applications: potential and real—not just computer literacy (Cheng 2001)
- Use of digitization (ACRL Top Ten Assumptions for the Future of Academic Libraries)
- Digital archiving (STS Continuing Education Survey 2005)
- Institutional Repositories/Digital Archives (STS Continuing Education Survey 2005)
- Staying technologically adept (Millet 2005)
- Research skills: appraisal and statistical techniques such as meta-analysis (Cheng 2001)
- Research skills for effective study of user needs and target services (Cheng 2001)
- Teaching skills for reference work (Shonrock 2006)
- Information literacy/Instruction (STS Continuing Education Survey 2005)

The literature also features extensive discussion of the changing nature of subject specialization. Relevant in the main to academic libraries, these topics include:

- Education in contemporary critical theory, which now penetrates so many traditional disciplines (Stebelman 1996)
- Specialization in science, as the majority of LIS graduates have a humanities background (Pearson and Webb 1988)
- The capacity to be trained in an area of specialization, which is more important than background (STS Continuing Education Survey 2001)
- Process knowledge in specialized subject areas, to enable filtering and appraisal of research studies (Cheng 2001)

Change is not new, of course—and librarians are well-practiced in adapting to change by enhancing established skill sets or inventing new ones. But are librarians adapting quickly and effectively enough *now*? This question is implicit in Cheng's 2001 use of ecology as a metaphor for exploring the "shifting information landscape" and for outlining changes in informational professional services. Cheng stresses the importance of *adaptability* in librarianship, and she sees continuous education and training as a "norm rather than an exception" in a profession that requires adaptation to fast changes. Within the context of "information ecosystems," she arrives at eleven core competencies for new librarians:

- Have a broad outlook of your organization's and users' needs
- Possess a good "business sense" balanced by professional ethics
- Study and research your users' needs and target your services to meet those needs
- Package, promote, and present your services
- Publish on the Web
- Communicate, coordinate, and collaborate with other information professionals and end users
- Participate in research using critical appraisal and statistical techniques such as meta-analysis
- Understand technology and its potential and real applications (not only being computer literate)
- Know and/or use metadata to organize digital information as one uses MARC to organize bibliographic data
- Conduct training workshops to impart knowledge of information resources on the Internet and alternative sources of information available commercially
- Possess knowledge in specialized subject areas to enable the filtering and appraisal of research studies

In different ways and to different extents, the importance of being adaptable penetrates much of the literature about continuing education for new librarians—and the idea of adaptability certainly figures centrally in accounts of what and how new librarians wish to learn. For example new public librarians indicate their keen interest in work that requires them to be adaptable (*What Are They Thinking?* 2006), and their learning preferences are evident in their "chief joys," which include:

- A constantly changing environment
- Continuous learning
- Creativity
- Connecting people with information

A relevant question in this regard has to do with what exactly the word *new* means in description of librarians. Are the "chief joys" noted above characteristic of *all* new librarians? Generational issues penetrate the literature at various points, most frequently perhaps with reference to younger or "NextGen" librarians (Gordon 2006; Shonrock 2006). As a consequence of this emphasis on youth, many (though by no means all) requisite skills for new librarians are described and explained in the context of the continuing educational needs of those who are both new *and* young. NextGens are most frequently characterized as (*What Are They Thinking?* 2006; Millet 2005):

- Enthusiastic
- Intellectually curious

- Technologically adept
- Open to change and innovation

However, NextGens often lack the skills borne of professional experience in such areas as:

- Budgeting
- Management
- Human relations

Furthermore, many NextGens are frustrated by the paucity of training opportunities available in their present positions (*What Are They Thinking?* 2006; Millet 2005). They readily express their need for (Shonrock 2006):

- Dynamic, interactive programs
- Programs that value interaction
- Programs that cultivate rising leaders

They also see themselves as (Markgren et al 2007):

- Pioneers of the new and alternative
- Deserving of respect

It is not unusual for NextGens to find the workplace frustrating, which can cause them at times to be “their own worst enemies” and to have difficulty moving beyond generational differences to contribute to the goals of librarianship (Gordon, *NextGen Librarians’ Survival Guide* 2006). Among the “NextGen issues” in the literature is a movement that discourages “age wars” and questions the value of approaching educational endeavors with generational differences in mind (Marydee 2005). The trend here is toward:

- “Generational awareness” grounded in two-way communication among the “young” and the “old” of the library profession
- “Personnel-type training” in the area of generational relationships (*Medical Library Association New Librarians Issues Survey* 2005)

Careful, thorough cross-generational thinking develops good communication that is valuable to *all* new librarians (Gordon, *Generational Journeys* 2005).

A final issue: Are new librarians learning the skill sets that will enable them practice their profession over long and rewarding careers? A significant trend discussed in the literature suggests that a high percentage of new librarians experience a “five-year itch,” manifesting itself in the form of dissatisfaction and restlessness (Markgren et al 2007). This points up the need for:

- Moral support professional development
- Financial support for continuing education

In this regard, new librarians who are frustrated are advised to

- Choose potential employers carefully
- Note indicators (such as recent changes in position descriptions) of management’s willingness to encourage staff to develop new skills and strengths

It is also important for employers to look for particular essential skills in new librarians (Tucker and Torrence 2004):

- Commitment to service
- Analytical perspective
- Communication skills

- Mathematical/financial skills
- Managerial skills and ethical values
- Commitment to continuous learning
- Vision

Further morale-related issues are plentiful in the literature. For example, library associations are encouraged to develop (*Medical Library Association New Librarians Issues Survey 2005*):

- More aggressive outreach programs
- Greater eagerness to embrace new ideas of younger people
- Training programs in practical, concrete skills
- Mentoring programs
- Travel scholarships for new members
- Networking education
- Description of core development tools

New public librarians list their greatest disappointments as (*What Are They Thinking 2006*):

- Bureaucracy
- Low compensation
- Low budgets
- Poor supervision and administrative leadership

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